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Roger Williams's Little Book Of Virtues

by Becky Garrison

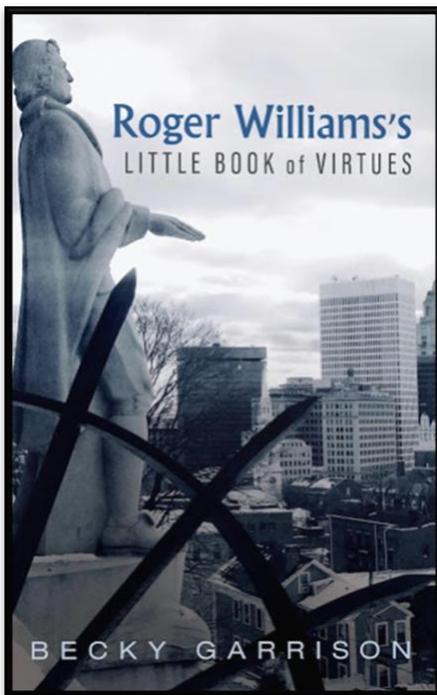
Resource Publications, an imprint of Wipf and Stock Publishers

978-1-5326-9654-1 / paperback / \$16

www.wipfandstock.com

New Title from Becky Garrison ***Roger Williams's Little Book Of Virtues***

In *Roger Williams's Little Book of Virtues*, religion writer Becky Garrison delves into the life of her eleventh great-grandfather to uncover the untold story behind this forgotten pioneer of religious liberty. Employing a format reminiscent of *How Proust Can Change Your Life* and *The Little Book of Atheist Spirituality*, Garrison examines Roger Williams's work through the lens of the four classical virtues, which, as she observes, define values that have an almost universal consensus regardless of one's particular belief system.



How can Roger Williams's life and ministry shed light on the role of the citizens in a global pluralized world? Garrison asks why this conversation focusing on the role of religion in public life got relegated to moralists like William J. Bennett, who crafted a fundamentalist rulebook that views these virtues through a very strict black-and-white lens.

In this age of horizontal social media, what prevents people from standing up to these modern-day Goliaths and taking away their media megaphone? Here Garrison sees hope in the rise of the "nones" who, like Williams, follow their own spiritual path and create spaces that embrace women, POC, LGBT folks, and others marginalized by the institutional church.

Becky Garrison is a satirist/storyteller. Her seven previous books include *Red and Blue God: Black and Blue Church* (2006).



Interview with Becky Garrison

Elaborate on what you meant when you said, “For those who think this rise of the religious right represents a new trend in Americana Christianity, history shows otherwise.”

Under Trump, the evangelicals have been rewriting their own code of ethics to where they began to once again tout views like #WhiteLivesMatter openly. However, this stinky spiritual stew had been brewing for some time just waiting for someone like him to come along and convince enough white Christians to join him in a godawful church supper. The mantra of many evangelicals, that America should shine forth as an exemplar of the Christian faith, has been around since the first Governor of the Massachusetts Bay Colony, John Winthrop, wrote the famous phrase, “a city upon a hill.” Far too many of them, however, believe that having power means that God is on their side—and that therefore, everything they do is right. Even today, the kind of thinking Winthrop used remains prevalent among those who wish to impart their particular brand of religion onto the rest of the world.

Explain some connections between the intellectual and spiritual journey of your ancestor, Roger Williams, and your own story. What other views did he hold that were also unique?

I was stunned at how much of my work almost directly paralleled Roger’s views on the separation of church and state. Subtle is not a word I’d use to describe either of our attacks on those who try to force their brand of religion into civil law, though I use satire more, and he spoke more directly. I did not read his works until after I had written numerous works focusing on the intersection of faith and politics -- Roger’s essence must be imbedded in my genetic code. Roger and I both ultimately found ourselves, as spiritual seekers, walking away from the institutional church.

Why do you remain optimistic in this current political climate?

I see signs of hope, especially among the rise of Americans who classify their religious affiliation as “none.” The number of those leaving the Christian faith, and evangelicalism in particular, continues to grow. Without guilt ridden dogmas, they are free to choose a path that speaks to them. Some find occasional comfort in a church, synagogue, temple, or mosque that truly welcomes all and aims to be a place of healing and not a means to harm others. Others will choose to worship, reflect, or meditate in other equally valid ways outside of traditional religious structures. Also, for the first time in U.S. history, one sees atheists and humanists starting to come out of the closet in droves.

An Excerpt from *Roger Williams's Little Book Of Virtues*

In the 2016 United States presidential election, 81 percent of white evangelicals voted for a reality TV star even though he seems to be a malignant narcissist and a sociopath. These are not personality traits normally associated with the teachings of their supposed leader in heaven, Jesus of Nazareth. But I suppose these Christians have a different criteria for their actual leader here on earth. As of January 2019, 69 percent of white evangelical Protestants continue to approve of the way Trump is handling his job as president. Once he exits the stage, I predict white evangelicals will continue to seek out those political candidates who will support the godawful agenda advanced by his administration.

Why is the current occupant in the White House supported by a triumvirate of right wing Christianity—American evangelicalism, the prosperity gospel, and white nationalist pride? What in God's name is going on?

Prior to the elevation of Trump by the majority of white evangelicals, I grew tired of satirizing this God-game, and moved on to covering other topics such as the craft culture and secular spiritualities I discovered upon moving to the Pacific Northwest. But the 2016 election stirred within me the bones of my ancestor Roger Williams. Just as he spoke out against injustices fueled by politicized religiosity, I realize I am called to do likewise.

“At a crisis when the public mind, in this and other countries, is so strongly excited on questions of civil and religious liberty, the great principle advocated by Williams—that civil rulers have no authority to pre- scribe, enjoin, or regulate religious beliefs—demands the most serious consideration of every church and of every government.”

—Romeo Elton, “Life of Roger Williams” (1862)

To paraphrase folk icon Bob Dylan—are the times a-changin'? Maybe not so much. Plus ça change, plus c'est la même chose. When I take the spiritual temperature of America, I feel the echoes of Roger in my bones. Elton's reflections, penned over 150 years ago in reference to this seventeenth-century pioneer of religious freedom, could easily apply to contemporary debates over the role of religion in the public square.

The philosopher George Santayana wrote, “Those who cannot remember the past are condemned to repeat it.” So before we look at our present Trumpster-dump, where a fear-based evangelical faith once again dominates the US of A from sea to shining sea we should do a quick run through of “Americana” Christianity to understand what we can learn from our past.

As Roger's direct descendant, I would like to explore what we can learn from my ancestor's life and legacy that can help us navigate through this current sociopolitical crisis. How did Roger manage to endure the trials of his life, and leave a legacy of liberty that echoes now throughout the world?

This isn't a Farmers' Almanac-y guidebook that serves up quotes from the past to help guide us through our contemporary problems. I want to explore how Roger lived a virtuous life with an eye towards what we can glean from his actions to help us get out of this twenty-first century religious morass. For those who think this rise of the religious right represents a new trend in Americana Christianity, history shows otherwise.

Praise for *Roger Williams's Little Book Of Virtues*

“With withering wit and uncommon wisdom, Becky Garrison turns our attention to Roger Williams, founder of the Baptist tradition in America and the neglected sage of early America. Williams’s warnings about the dangers of conflating church and state have never been more relevant.”

—**Randall Balmer, John Phillips Professor in Religion, Dartmouth College; author of *Redeemer: The Life of Jimmy Carter***

“It has never been more timely, more important than now to rediscover the great, mostly under-recognized champion of religious liberty, Roger Williams. Becky Garrison’s on-point commentary and judicious use of Williams’s best, most insightful quotes reminds me of the work of Molly Ivins—another champion of no-nonsense political and religious insight.”

—**Robert F. Darden, Professor of Journalism, Public Relations, and New Media, Baylor University**

